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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKISH IMAM MURDERED; COMMUNITY ADMINISTERS
FRONTIER JUSTICE IN MOSQUE

REF: ANKARA 4199

¶1. (U) Summary. An Imam reportedly in line to succeed the current head of the Nakshibendi tarikat (mystical Sufi organization) in Turkey was stabbed to death in his mosque following morning prayers. His attacker was immediately killed by the Imam's fellow worshippers. The incident continues to feature prominently in Turkish newspapers and disturb the faithful in Istanbul a week after its occurrence. There are many pieces to this puzzle of intrigue, including the fact that tarikats themselves are illegal. End summary.

JUST THE FACTS

¶2. (U) On Sunday, September 3, retired imam Bayram Ali Ozturk was stabbed to death following morning prayer in Ismail Aga Mosque in Istanbul, s Carsamba neighborhood of the conservative Fatih district. His murderer, Mustafa Erdal, was quickly killed by fellow worshippers. While it has been established that this frontier-style justice was carried out inside the mosque where the original attack occurred, the method used to kill Erdal still has not been established. More than a week later, no one has been arrested and at least 25 witnesses to the killing were released after making statements. The funerals for both Erdal and Imam Ozturk were held on Monday, September 4. Some 10,000 people attended the imam, s funeral, including Saadet Party (Islamic Felicity Party) Chairman Recai Kutan, Fatih Mayor Mustafa Demir and Eyup Mayor Ahmet Genc, both mayors from the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

¶3. (U) The Ismail Aga mosque is controlled by the Ismail Aga branch of the Nakshibendi sect, or tarikat. Press reports indicate that Ozturk had been the primary candidate to replace the current leader of the tarikat, Mahmut Ustaosmanoglu.

¶4. (C/NF) The secular reform laws of the 1920s outlawed tarikats, yet tarikats continue to function openly in Turkey. Tarikats became increasingly prominent following the 1980 military takeover that ended the political extremist violence of the late 1970s. Dr. Izzettin Dogan, president of the Cem Vakfi (Alevi) has commented that relaxation of the tarikat prohibition at that time was intended to curb extreme leftist ideology. Some claim Prime Minister Erdogan is a Nakshibendi, as was - although not publicly known at the time - former Prime Minister and President Ozal (see reftel).

INTRIGUE GROWS

¶5. (U) Stories about these two mosque murders continue to

make front page headlines in Turkish newspapers with investigations covering various aspects of the story. One newspaper alleged that the Ismail Aga branch has power within local mafia. Another paper said that despite a prosecutor's request, previous incidents at the tarikat have not been investigated by the police. Another paper ran a story about an "illegal" boarding school for Koranic studies for boys 15 to 18 years of age run by the Ismail Aga tarikat. Finally, now covering almost every angle, another paper ran photos of a reputedly USD 2 million villa on the Bosphorus owned by one of the Ismail Aga imams. CHP leader Deniz Baykal claimed in Sabah newspaper that the Ismail Aga community has established an independent "republic" complete with underground court systems that dispenses sharia law.

¶16. (C) Mustafa Akyol, writer and observer of Turkey's Islamic community, told us papers continue to write about the event in an effort to force police to bring to justice those who undertook the revenge killing. Akyol maintains failure in this regard is due to the Turkish National Police's (TNP's) generally conservative mindset that views the Ismail Aga community as law-abiding citizens who took matters into their own hands to bring "justice" to a killer. Leftists and Kurds, among others, do not receive this pass from the traditionally-minded TNP, according to Akyol. Akyol claims professionalism among TNP officers is improving, particularly as selected officers receive training in the United States and elsewhere, but time is needed to permit these more professionally-trained officers to take on positions of greater authority.

¶17. (SBU) Dr. Emre Oktem of Galatasaray University law faculty confirmed that rumors continue to swirl regarding the Ismail Aga group, including rumors of secretive, extralegal

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activity. An obviously ironic letter in Hurriyet daily on September 5 said in part, "A killing by beating took place in the Ismail Aga mosque! Of course, there is sharia in Turkey, where you seize the guilty, try him in a sharia court of justice and immediately kill him."

CONCERN LEADS TO RE-EMPHASIS ON PRIVATE FAITH

¶18. (SBU) On a different plane, the majority of religious Stambulus, according to Oktem, reflect a traditional Turkish attitude toward religion that prefers maintenance of a strict secularism in government. These Turks want the government to maintain a wall of separation (a concept for Turks more absolute than the Jeffersonian idea) between what they regard as private, religious practice, and state matters. Oktem cited his visit to a favorite clothing shop in the Fatih district near where the murders had occurred as an example. The devout husband/wife proprietors, very concerned about the events in their neighborhood, told Oktem that all they sought was the chance to worship God according to their own consciences with a deep desire to avoid ever having anyone dictate to them the modalities of religious practice. Even this couple, Oktem said, were afraid that Islamic faith was becoming too prominent a feature in Turkish politics.

¶19. (C) Comment. The TNP's handling of the retaliatory killing in the Fatih district mosque reflects a common tendency among many Turks to reflexively approve or condone actions without reference to legal merit. This deeply ingrained ideal of a "common sense" approach to right and wrong leads to occasional misunderstanding between Americans and Turks as the perceived rightness or wrongness of an action overrides strict rule of law. If Akyol is correct in his assessment, Turkish newspapers' obsession with this story may be a signal that certain segments of society are breaking out of this reflexive mindset. End comment.

JONES